



ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

May 1992

"Pastor, I Know I Shouldn't Say This To You..." Making It Safe For People To Process Grief Within The Church (reprinted from "Oil of Gladness", GLAD District newsletter, Spring 1992)

By Rev. Christine Oscar

"Pastor, I know I shouldn't say this to you..."

"Pastor, I know I shouldn't feel this way, but..."

"Pastor, help me, please."

"Pastor, it should have been me, not her, not him..."

"Pastor, please tell me how to make the pain STOP..."

A few days ago I was watching a TV program that was dealing with unique ways of dealing with common childhood problems. The "problem" that struck me was "Monster Dreams." A little girl was having nightly dreams of monsters and she was terrified to go to sleep at night. No amount of parental love and assurance would work. She was terrified. Reasoning was fruitless, since monsters are not reasonable beings. The mother, at her wits' end, tried

a drastic, but amazingly simple measure. She took a common spray bottle, filled it with tap water and a little bit of perfume and put a label on it saying, "Monster Spray." She told her daughter that this spray would protect her from any and every monster. Each night the mother sprayed around her daughter's window and doorway and reassured her that the room was then "safe." The little girl slept peacefully, freed of her monster dreams. I couldn't help but think how we all need "safe places" to deal with our monsters. I wish that we could put "safety" in a spray bottle. God knows it would break all existing sales records.

One of the greatest challenges that face us as pastors and as pastoral people is to create "safe places" for people to process their grief. Since we don't have "monster spray," it is important that we develop an atmosphere of safety for people who need to honestly talk about

their grief. We have to be educated about the grief process and know how we manifest our own grief. If we are unable to own up to our griefs, then we will be unable to help others do so with us. If we are not safe, conscious people, we cannot create safe places for our people. It always saddens me when I hear people say: "Pastor, I know I shouldn't say this or feel this..." As pastors and as pastoral people, we must make it safe enough to say things that in days gone by, couldn't or wouldn't be said in our offices.

"Pastor, I am really angry at God."

"Pastor, I don't feel that it is really a loving God..."

"Pastor, right now I really hate God."

"Pastor, is this God's way of paying me back?"

"Pastor, I can't pray right now."

Unfortunately, there are not uncommon statements for people in grief.

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It Was Supposed To Have Been A Memorial Service

By Rev. Jo Crisco, Pastor of Trinity MCC, Arlington, TX

(Editor's Note: This was written about Larry Boyd's Memorial Service. Larry was the life partner of Rev. David Presley. --See the April '92 ALERT.)

Folks, bear with me. It's late tonight and what I witnessed today has left me heartbroken, somewhat disillusioned, and nearly enraged.

It was supposed to have been a funeral service, a memorial service honoring the life of a fine young man. He was a gentle, kind, loving, Christian man who had a captivating smile. It WAS supposed to have been HIS memorial service, instead, in the name of God and in the vein of religious bigotry, the service was a negation of his whole life.

It was supposed to have been a memorial service. On the contrary, his spouse, his spouse's daughter, his friends, his church, and his community were stripped, not only of recognition but also of dignity. It was as though neither he nor we existed.

It was supposed to have been a memorial service. So we, who had loved him, who were grieving our loss of him, had gathered to pay our respects, to comfort each other, and to celebrate his life. We were each hurting in our own way. We were trying to do this one last thing for our friend.

Perhaps I am naive, but I had expected the elderly preacherman to offer some words of comfort. I did not expect him to agree with us theologically. Nevertheless, I did expect him to be a believable representative of a loving God who cares about human pain and suffering. I just assumed that this man, who reportedly had given years of his life serving God, would display some measure of human kindness, some compassion, some gentle care. I thought he would have been steeped in the basic tenets of Christianity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "As I have loved you, so should you love." "Judge not, lest you also be judged." "Be kind one to the other." "Love your neighbor as yourself."

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It is very normal for griever to feel abandoned by God and express this through anger, hate or unbelief. I believe that it is absolutely critical that we create safe places within the church for this part of our grief process if we are committed to be leaders of faith. Will we commit ourselves to help people walk through the valleys of shadows and doubt or will we leave them wandering there alone?

How do we go about creating safe places and being safe people for people in the valley?

▼ We must become educators and students of grief.

▼ We must be able to understand how grief works in and on our lives.

▼ We must avoid cliches.

▼ We must avoid moralizing.

▼ We must listen to questions rather than trying to answer them for someone.

▼ We must facilitate their story-telling.

▼ We must build liturgies of grief.

Education and Students of Grief Process

There are numerous books and publications that we can turn to for information on the grief process. We can stay current by attending workshops on grief and bereavement. We can study on our own through prayer and journaling. When we understand how grief manifests in our own lives, we will have a better understanding of how grief manifests in others. Also, being able to own and tell stories about the valley of shadows will make us more credible as grief counselors and safe people.

Avoid Cliches

"I know just how you feel."

"It's God's will."

"Simply trust God."

"Be strong in your faith."

"Time heals all things."

Using these well known cliches (and these are just a few) can drive the pain of grief underground and make it even more painful and difficult to deal with. Cliches tend to invalidate real feelings.

"I know just how you feel." I'll state the obvious: no one feels just like another. Each person's experience is unique, even when we are talking about the same death or other grief experience. Each relationship, each experience is unique and must be honored as such. *"I know just how you must feel"* will stop the griever and cause them to further dam up their feelings.

"It's God's will," "Simply trust in God," "Be strong in your faith." These cliches will often alienate a person even further. "God's will" has little to say to the person in pain except that God is directly responsible. "Simply trust in God." I don't know about you, but I don't find trust (even in God) to be "simple" during the best of times, let alone during the worst of times. "Be strong in your faith." When your faith feels as substantial as a bowl of cream of wheat, being strong in it doesn't say much. Faith is not the absence of doubt, but the care-fronting of doubt, one step at a time.

"Time heals all things." is one of the biggest lies of all time. "Time" has no healing qualities, only distancing qualities. Time does not heal our pain or grief, but it does give us some distance from the event itself. Grief must be worked through for the individual to truly heal. Distancing only drives grief further underground making the healing process even more difficult. We do a grave injustice to people when we lead them to believe that the mere passing of time will heal their wounds.

Avoid Moralizing

It is highly appropriate to guide those in our pastoral care towards healthy grief outlets but it is not appropriate, nor prudent, to place value judgements on those in grief. It is not unusual for people in tremendous grief to act out sexually. One way grief may manifest is in indiscriminate sexual behavior. When we understand that some individuals will choose this route to drive away their pain or to affirm that they are still alive in body, even if they don't feel alive in spirit, we can be more effective spiritual guides to help them feel alive once again. Judgement or moralizing will only affirm what they already may be experiencing, a sense of spiritual death. Our goal as shepherds must be to gently guide them toward more healthy outlets.

We don't have all the Answers

No matter how well acquainted we may be with grief, our answers are our answers. We cannot assume that our answers will be adequate for their questions. It is more important to encourage the griever to voice their questions than to attempt to answer their questions. Once they are in touch with their questions, they are on the road to answers. Our God is certainly big enough, wise enough and compassionate enough to handle their questions. The Church must learn to listen to questions if it

hopes to help provide answers that are meaningful.

Facilitate Storytelling

Shiela, a member of St. Mary's MCC, went to Texas to see her brother who was living with AIDS. Toward the end of her visit, he suddenly got sick and died. She was devastated. Driving around Ft. Worth in a fog, she saw the local MCC that her brother had pointed out to her just the week before. She found her way to the church and to the altar even though no service was in progress. Two women from the church joined her there and asked her why she was there. When she told them that her brother Tony had just died, one of them said, "Tell me about Tony." She poured out her grief through her storytelling. The greatest gift of ministry was to facilitate her storytelling. It was a gift that we all can give. People need to "tell their story" until they are done. For some, that will be once or twice, for others it will be many, many times. Giving people permission and opportunity to tell their stories will greatly help their healing process.

Liturgies of Grief

The church must become the lead vehicle in the caravan of grief. We must lead the way or be left behind. The funeral or memorial service will set the stage for the grief process. If we focus only on how "wonderful" it is that our loved one is now with God, we set in motion a spiritual denial that can lead to spiritual death. It may indeed be wonderful for the person who has passed from this life to the next, but that's not how the survivors usually feel. We are drenched in sadness and pain and must find ways to release. Keep in mind that the shortest verse in scripture is also one of the most profound: "Jesus wept." (John 11:35) Creating an atmosphere where tears are acceptable gives the griever permission to release some of the pain. The reverse is also true. Creating an atmosphere of laughter and celebration is equally important. Funny stories about the deceased sets the stage for celebration and remembering the gift of that person's presence in our own life. Structuring liturgies that incorporate room for both tears and laughter gives permission for us to grieve and remember in the fullness of who we are created to be.

A Safe Place

Time and again we lose people during times of grief. We compound their sense

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Moments of Grief, Measures of Grace

By Rev. Steve Pieters

My father died January 23, 1992, following a long struggle with Chronic Lymphatic Leukemia. I feel very blessed that my mother, my brother, Rick, cousins David and Nancy, and I were all able to be with him at the end. Being present at the moment of death confronted us with the reality of what had happened, and enabled us to immediately give in to the grieving process.

My father died very beautifully. He had been unconscious for about ten hours when, at 11:15 p.m., he woke up, and looked at all of us as we held his hands and caressed him. He turned his head towards my mother and me, and pursed his lips several times as if he were trying to get enough moisture in his mouth to speak. Then he gulped and we saw the life go out of his eyes. We spent about a half hour with him afterwards, telling him to go to the light, and just letting him know how much we love him.

My grief has come in waves. I wept copiously with my family the night he died. We were never a "late-night" kind of group, but there we were at 1 and 2 a.m., crying with each other, trying to support each other. At church the following Sunday, my mother and I "lost it," as my brother put it, and we cried throughout the service. I managed to hold myself together pretty well at the Sun City memorial service, until after I had spoken, and then I was overwhelmed with sadness, especially as people extended themselves to us in the receiving line. I remember one old man in particular, whom Mother whispered to me had lost his wife just a few months ago. His chin shook as he tried to express how he understood exactly what we were feeling. He looked like a lost little boy, disappointed in life, and I cried right along with him.

As that week went on, I heard from lots of friends, and felt a lot of support and love. Beautifully worded sympathy cards arrived from all over the Fellowship. I remember thinking, "This isn't so hard." I was feeling the loss, but felt surprisingly buoyed. I did a Grief Management Seminar at the Charismatic Conference at MCC Long Beach the next week, and was proud of myself for holding together so well, and making so much sense of it all! At Dad's funeral and burial in Massachusetts in mid-February, I felt quite secure in my faith. I carried Dad's ashes from the church to his grave while talking with a younger colleague of Dad's about the prep school production of "Into the Woods" he was acting in the next weekend.

Through the next month, the grief seemed to retreat, and I hardly even thought about it during my vacation at the end of March. But as the vacation went on, I got more and more depressed, and returned to work with a despair that felt like cement. The first two weeks of April I have spent time crying almost every day. The image of Dad lying there with lifeless eyes keeps coming back. I'm realizing that this "change in our relationship," as my friend Alison put it, is permanent. I miss him terribly, and feel very abandoned. It seems like people don't understand the way they did right after he died. It feels like I should be over it, and back at my life.

But everything has changed, my life is different, I think about what I've told people in grief, that no one can take away the memories and the love, and we will see our loved ones again. I affirm to myself that Dad was a man of great faith, and that Jesus said, "Those who believe in me, even though they die, they shall live." I want to make my life and actions a living memorial to what a great man I thought my father to be.

But instead, I find myself getting angry at friends who are trying to help, staring at my word processor blankly at work, about my own health, and feeling lonelier, emptier and less motivated than I've felt since I was first sick and no one seemed to believe me. I'm an "AIDS Professional." I've been around it for years. I've studied grief, I've watched grief, I've felt grief before. So why am I surprised at this delayed grief response I'm having?

Even in the face of this new intensity of grief, I see glimpses of grace. I baptized two children with aids last Sunday. They really wanted to be baptized, because they were scared of death, and scared of being abandoned again, as their drug addict parents had abandoned them. As I looked in these two little girls' eyes, there was an excitement about the assurances of baptism, and the promises of faith. There was a sparkling clarity about their simple faith in what they were receiving through baptism; I could see that they felt stronger because of their new relationship with Jesus. I told them I was a person with aids, too, and that we were now related by blood, and by water. I took comfort in the renewal of life that was happening in these two little girls with aids. It doesn't fill the emptiness, or take away the loneliness or despair over Dad, but it does give me the strength to get up again today, and at least turn on the word processor and start writing.

Nothing can separate me from Dad's love, not even death. I still have Dad's love. I know he is enjoying eternal life. But I still hurt. I still miss him, and I know everything has changed now, forever. And I know enough to know that I have to allow myself that hurt to happen if I'm ever going to get through it. Someone wrote that "the purpose of grief is to be able to risk loving again." I will never experience love again quite the way I experienced it with Dad. But I do want to experience love again, so I will allow myself to experience the pain of grief for now, affirming that God is with me, even when I feel abandoned. From experience, I know that even though I may not feel God's presence, I will one day see exactly how God was present during this time. ▼

(Pastor, I Know...continued from page 2)

of isolation, aloneness, of unworthiness and uniqueness by failing to create a safe place for grief to take place within our churches. We condemn people to wander alone through the valley of shadows when we fail to join them and lead them during such times. Jesus was and is our example. Jesus wept with his friends and for his friend. Jesus was "safe" enough for Mary and Martha to lash out in their anger and grief. Jesus sought out Mary and Martha. Jesus listened. Jesus wept. Jesus led the grief caravan. Can we, or should we do any less? ▼

ALERT

ALERT is a monthly newsletter containing information on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment. The Editor is the Rev. Dr. Stephen Pieters. For more information, please write: ALERT, c/o UFMCC, 5300 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 304, Los Angeles, CA 90029.

His Name Is Magic

By Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey

When I was traveling to Sarasota in February to do the memorial service for the Rev. Robert Pierce, I dressed in full clerics, and left out of Los Angeles International Airport, which was highly unusual for me. I rarely travel in clerics, and usually fly out of Burbank.

As I sat in the airport waiting for my flight, I saw a large group rushing through the area. Towering above everyone else's head, walking in the center of the group, was Magic Johnson. I have no idea what moved me, as I am not a sports fan, but move I did. I walked right through his group of bodyguards and touched his arm. One of his bodyguards quickly made a move to come between us, but I looked up at Magic and said, "Mr. Johnson, I am an HIV+ woman." He immediately put his hand on mine, and said to his guards, "Ask them to hold the plane."

I told him I was grateful to him for coming out as HIV+, and at the same time sorry that it had taken him to get the world's attention; that the rest of us needed help, too. He said he was sorry about that, too. Then he noticed how I was dressed and asked who I was. I told him, "I'm the Rev. Elder Jeri Ann Harvey, an Evangelist for the Metropolitan Community Churches." Then I said, "I am praying for you, your wife, and your unborn child, Mr. Johnson." He thanked me and said, "That's what keeps me going." Then he apologized to me that he had to catch his plane, and he was gone. In those few minutes he had convinced me that I was someone he cared about. I was touched.

Several weeks later in another airport, as I was about to board, I heard a voice say, "Rev. Jeri! Keep those prayers going. They work!" And I saw his head above the others again. I take back everything I have ever said...His name really IS MAGIC! ▼

In Memoriam: The Rev. Ernie Edwards

By Rev. Jay Neely, Gulf Lower Atlantic District Coordinator

The Rev. Ernie Edwards spent the final years of his life in the Gulf Lower Atlantic District. He spent those years, as he had in the Great Lakes District, as a servant of God and minister of the Gospel. Ernie was called home by God on March 29, 1992.

In January of 1990, "Rev. Ernie" telephoned me from Ohio and told me he had been called by God to pastor MCC Mobile, AL. He moved to Alabama with his ailing spouse, Michael, and his mother, in May of 1990. In August of that year, Michael passed away. Shortly thereafter, Ernie was diagnosed as having AIDS. Ernie continued to serve as Pastor until his illness forced him to leave. But Ernie was not ready to relinquish the call to service which was the hallmark of his life. Early in 1991, he agreed to join the staff of First MCC in Atlanta. Ernie participated in the life of that church as his health permitted, and often regardless of his own well-being.

Ernie's determination to hear God's clear direction for his life is what we will remember, and what he taught by the way he lived his life. Rev. Ernie Edwards understood that to be a servant of Christ was to give fully of himself and to make that service manifest even in the final days of his life. God bless you, brother; we have learned from your example. ▼

(It Was Supposed To Have Been A Memorial Service, continued from page 1)

I was disappointed. Rather than reflect anything of the core of Christianity or offer one word of celebration for our friend's life, this preacher used him to abuse US. We were a captive audience. Our affection for our friend gathered us there. Our training on polite, socially acceptable behavior kept us seated there. Our grieving and rejoicing hearts were stunned as the preacher railed on and on about the dangers of hell-fire; the need for repentance and that it did not matter what we believed, unless we repented, we were bound for hell-fire.

Just when we thought it could not get any worse, it did. At grave side, the preacher prayed that these "children of satan" would repent and escape the damnation of hell-fire."

For the first time in my life, I was embarrassed to be associated with Christianity...this display of Christianity was so bitter. I was ashamed that I share a like church background with this preacher. Is this how people are attracted to Christ? Who on earth would want to embrace a God or theology that would cause someone to act in such an insensitive and hateful manner? No one that I know!

I know both the quality and the quantity of love and care that these so-called "children of satan" had given our friend. They were the ones who had cared that he had dignity both in living and in dying. They were the ones who did for him what any of us would want done for ourselves. They were the ones who laughed and prayed with him.

They did all of these things not only out of love for our friend but also because they, one and all, believe in Christ and in Christianity. These dear people, whom the preacher had the gall to call "children of satan", had in fact, become the very essence of the living Christ. And I must add, they did all these things while neither the "holy" man, nor his kind, lifted one finger of compassion nor spoke one word of kindness.

I wonder if these supposed "righteous-saved-from-hell" people have ever read these words of Jesus? "In as much as you have done it unto the least of one of these, YOU HAVE DONE IT UNTO ME." I wonder.

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN HIS MEMORIAL SERVICE.

Despite my frustration and anger, I do have a word of comfort and victory. The LAST thing that occurred in the funeral service was the playing of a tape of a woman and a man singing about their hope. The man singing was our friend. He had the last word in a service that had denied him, and his, dignity. As the preacher concluded his grave side prayer for the "children of satan," my people, God's wonderful people, began to sing as one voice: "Because Christ lives, I can face tomorrow. Because Christ lives, all fear is gone. Because I know who holds the future, my life is worth the living, just because Christ lives." We also had the last word.

I have never been more proud to be a part of our people. For you see, Beloved, I too, embrace Christianity and am a follower of Christ. But without question what the preacher displayed today is neither the God nor the kind of Christianity with which I am familiar. His definition of Christianity-in-action doesn't work for me.

As we continue to unite as a community, it is imperative that we, not anyone else, define who and what we are. It is also imperative that we share our experience of a loving and including God. IT WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN A MEMORIAL SERVICE. ▼